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ABSTRACT

Describes the development of the Trait Ascription Questionnaire, which measures perceptions that people have of organizations. The descriptive adjectives are divided into eight dimensions: Ethican-Moral; Quality; Creativity-Openness to Change; Activity; Disposition; Organization; Potency; and Complexity. A breakdown of scale characteristics, mean scale values for extreme organizations and some test groups, and a listing of most and least descriptive adjectives are included. (DLG)

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A Method for Measuring the Images of Organizations[1]

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While there has been a fair amount of research on the structural characteristics of organizations, on leadership and managerial styles, and on organizational climates, there has been relatively little research on how organizations are perceived by members of organizational sub-units, by non-members who are directly or indirectly influenced by organizations, or by relatively detached outsiders. There has of course been some work in this area by consumer psychologists and motivation researchers, but I think it is fair to say that very little is known about how people perceive organizations or about the dimensions which might be involved in such perceptions.

During the past two years I have been conducting informal and very unstructured interviews with college students, with members of various types of volunteer organizations, and with managerial personnel from several large business organizations. In the course of these interviews, I have become increasingly interested and fascinated by the fact that people have rather definite impressions of what organizations are like. People tend to ascribe traits and personality attributes to organizations, and the ability to do this appears to be unrelated to the degree of personal involvement or direct contact with the organizations.

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As a result of impressions gained in the interviews, I thought it would be interesting to see if organizations could be differentiated along personality dimensions as measured by scales on existing tests. With this in mind I modified the instructions for Gough's Adjective Check List and Cattel's 16 PF and asked students in the business school at Berkeley to describe not themselves but, instead, three different organizations. The organizations were IBM, Pacific Gas and Electric, and the United States Army. The tests were scored in the usual manner and, indeed, there were substantial differences between the organizations on several of the personality dimensions. Nonetheless, I felt a bit uncomfortable about the results. From the beginning I was, of course, concerned about the fact that the scales on the tests were empirically derived to differentiate people and not organizations. But I think what disturbed me more was the muffled snickering which accompanied the effort to decide if IBM is "sexy" and "charming" or whether the Army would prefer people who "admire the beauty of a fairy tale more than that of a well-made gun." Since the scales were obviously inappropriate, and since most of the items were at best only metaphorically applicable to organizations, the decision was made to abandon existing measures and to instead develop something from scratch.

Development of the Trait Ascription Questionnaire (TAQ)

Our aim was to develop a single and generalizable instrument that would be useful for describing individuals, groups, and larger human collectivities such as business and industrial organizations, public institutions, ethnic groups, and countries. As a first step toward this goal we established a pool of several hundred trait descriptive adjectives. The adjectives were drawn from a wide variety of sources including personality inventories, adjective check lists, semantic differential scales, advertisements in newspapers

and magazines, Roget's thesaurus, and so on. The pool was then reduced somewhat by eliminating archaic adjectives and adjectives that we thought would be unfamiliar to most people.

A further reduction of the pool was achieved by asking people to place each adjective into one or more of three categories: (A) appropriate mainly for the description of individual persons, (B) appropriate mainly for the description of groups of persons or organizations, and (C) equally appropriate for the description of individuals, groups, or organizations. Our analysis of these judgments indicated that most of the adjectives in our pool were primarily applicable to the description of individuals and that very few adjectives were seen to be primarily appropriate to the description of organizations. Our main interest, however, was in those adjectives placed in the third category, that is, adjectives that were regarded as equally appropriate for the description of individuals, groups, or organizations. Therefore, we retained for further analysis those adjectives that had been placed in the third category by at least 50% of our judges.

Our next step was to perform a content analysis of the now much reduced pool of trait descriptive adjectives. This analysis yielded the eight scales or dimensions listed in Table 1: Ethical--Moral; Quality; Creativity--Openness to Change; Activity; Disposition; Organization; Potency; and Complexity. As a check on the adequacy of these categories we obtained a second group of judges, provided them with descriptions of the dimensions, and then asked them to indicate the appropriate dimension for each of our adjectives. Our current instrument, called the Trait Ascription Questionnaire, contains only those adjectives which could be reliably assigned to the eight categories or dimensions that appeared in the initial content analysis.

Next to the dimension labels in Table 1 you will see examples of the adjectives which characterize each dimension. Favorability ratings were obtained for all 110 adjectives in order to determine the direction of scoring. Each dimension is scored in the positive direction by reversing the negative adjectives. The adjectives are presented to respondents in alphabetical order with these instructions:

> On the following pages you will find some adjectives that have been used to describe people, organizations, and institutions. We would like you to indicate how well each adjective describes _____. Some of the adjectives may fit perfectly, other adjectives may be only somewhat applicable, and still others may not apply at all.

Each adjective is followed by a five-point Likert type scale. The extremes of the scales are labeled "Fits Perfectly" and "Does Not Apply"; the midpoints are labeled "Somewhat Applicable".

Validity of the Questionnaire

How is it possible to know if the scales are any good? The fact that people are able to reliably sort adjectives into eight categories or dimensions does not mean that organizations can be differentiated along these dimensions. To provide a check on this we submitted a list of 20 organizations to approximately 20 judges; the judges were secretaries, graduate and undergraduate students in psychology, and a few indulgent colleagues. The organizations were: the Atomic Energy Commission; the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations; the Black Panthers; the Boy Scouts of America; the Catholic church; the CIA; General Motors; IBM; the Mafia; NASA; the NAACP; Polaroid; Rolls Royce; the Salvation Army; Standard Oil; Stanford Research Institute; SDS; Southern Pacific Railroad; the United Nations; and the United States Army.

The judges were provided with descriptions of the eight dimensions and were asked, for each dimension, to select the highest and lowest organizations from the list of 20. From their pooled judgments we selected organizations to represent the extremes on each dimension. For example, on the Ethical--Moral dimension the two organizations selected were the Boy Scouts of America and the Mafia. We then asked Berkeley undergraduate students to describe the various organizations by completing the Trait Ascription Questionnaire.

Table 2 shows the means, t ratios, and the estimated overlap obtained from the description of extreme organizations on each dimension. Generally it can be said that the scales worked pretty well. Significant differences were obtained between extreme organizations on each dimension and the estimated percentages of overlap between the description distributions were fairly small. Moreover, Potency and Activity, the two scales which showed the greatest overlap between descriptions of extreme organizations, were also the scales on which our original sample of judges showed the least agreement. While it is possible, of course, that the Potency and Activity scales do not permit discrimination along the intended dimensions, I rather suspect that the problem is as much with the particular organizations we chose to represent the dimensions as it is with the scales themselves

Another way of knowing whether the Trait Ascription Questionnaire makes sense as a method of measuring the perceptions or images that people have of organizations would be to obtain descriptions of an organization that we know something about and see if these descriptions match up with what we already know. For this purpose we selected a large maximum-security prison. The Trait Ascription Questionnaire was administered to 88 inmates who worked in the prison furniture factory, a second group of 57 inmates who worked as support or maintenance workers within the prison, and 65 Civil Service employees who were involved either with custody or direct supervision of inmates.

The mean scale values for the inmate and civil service groups are presented in Table 3. As expected, the inmate groups are very similar in their perceptions of the institution and these perceptions are clearly different from those of the Civil Service employees on all eight dimensions. The difference between the inmate groups on the Potency dimension is possibly a chance difference; however, it might also reflect the fact that the factory workers are more closely supervised and have less freedom to move about the prison than the support or maintenance workers.

In addition to the description provided by the eight general dimensions of the Trait Ascription Questionnaire, it is possible to obtain a more idiographic description of a particular organization by listing the adjectives that respondents judge to be most and least descriptive. An example of some results obtained from this kind of analysis is presented in Table 4. For this analysis we simply combined our inmate samples and pulled out the ten adjectives judged to be most descriptive and the ten adjectives judged to be least descriptive. The results fit rather well with what is known about maximum-security prisons; the adjectives seem to provide a good picture, at least from the point of view of an inmate, of what a prison is and what a prison is not.

Additional Trait Ascription Questionnaire Projects

In our current work with the Trait Ascription Questionnaire we are gathering descriptions of a wide variety of organizations and institutions from an equally wide variety of individuals. We are interested in learning how particular institutions and organizations are viewed by different subgroups of people and how these views or images are related to such behaviors as taking a job, leaving an organization, decisions to donate time or money, and participation in strikes, demonstrations, and acts of violence against organizations.

At the same time, of course, we are investigating the psychometric properties of the Trait Ascription Questionnaire, and we do intend to make some additions and deletions of adjectives for certain scales. With these improvements, I feel that we will have a fairly good instrument for measuring and comparing the images of organizations.

Table 1

Dimension Characteristics

	Dimension	Direction of Scoring: High	Direction of Scoring: Low
I	Ethical--Moral	honest respectable	crooked unethical
II	Quality	capable successful	inefficient incapable
III	Creativity--Openness to Change	adaptable innovative	old-fashioned opinionated
IV	Activity	busy active	slow dead
V	Disposition	generous helpful	unresponsive intolerant
VI	Organization	planful systematic	disorderly disorganized
VII	Potency	forceful powerful	weak ineffective
VIII	Complexity	complex complicated	simple

Table 2

Mean Scale Values for Extreme Organizations

Dimension	Possible Range	High	Low	t	Percentage Overlap
Ethical--Moral	20-100	87.77	35.19	17.42**	2
Quality	23-115	112.92	87.39	6.58**	42
Creativity--Openness to Change	22-110	82.92	51.69	9.08**	30
Activity	10-50	51.19	38.19	4.01**	56
Disposition	18-90	77.42	51.08	9.75**	46
Organization	12-60	50.31	35.23	5.22**	47
Potency	15-75	56.08	50.19	2.70*	69
Complexity	4-20	18.39	8.85	12.12**	10

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Table 3

Mean Scale Values for Inmate and Civil Service Groups

	Factory (N = 88)	Support (N = 57)	Civil Service* (N = 65)
Ethical--Moral	55.43	49.12	81.49
Creativity--Openness to Change	78.93	72.49	106.66
Disposition	63.89	60.56	72.80
Potency	37.67 ($p < .05$)	33.98	45.37
Quality	60.24	55.79	74.66
Activity	33.48	32.18	43.65
Organization	46.64	45.14	57.69
Complexity	10.64	10.51	13.71

* All differences between Civil Service and inmate groups significant at .01 level.

Table 4

Most and Least Descriptive Adjectives

Most Descriptive Adjectives	Least Descriptive Adjectives
Authoritative	Cooperative
Cold	Ethical
Distrustful	Generous
Forceful	Honest
Inadequate	Imaginative
Old-fashioned	Modern
Powerful	Open
Suspicious	Respectable
Systematic	Venturesome
Unfair	Weak